Changing Times, Changing Roles: G. F. Ainsworth (1878-1950) – An Australian Biographical Case Study

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Historical biography offers a unique perspective on social change, by viewing developments over time – usually a lifetime or part thereof - through the experience of one particular individual. Thus, by means of a biographical case study, we get an insight into how such an individual may have effected, and been affected by change in his or her own environment or society. For the purposes of this paper, the biography of George Frederick Ainsworth will be considered as a case study.

Antarctic explorer, author, intelligence agent, businessman, political organizer, radio broadcaster and gambler – George Frederick Ainsworth was all of these in his lifetime, and more. Born at Charlestown near Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW), on 2 June 1878, George Ainsworth was a resourceful man with a commanding manner who relished a challenge, as his varied career path in life clearly demonstrated. His leadership abilities, recognized initially by Dr Douglas Mawson who placed Ainsworth in charge of the First Australasian Antarctic Expedition's Macquarie Island Station in 1911, were also shown to good effect subsequently in the counter-intelligence, criminal investigation, foreign affairs, business and political roles that he performed. He led a busy, active and eventful life in which there seems rarely, if ever, to have been a dull moment. And in the process, he made a rather varied and substantial, though not generally well-known contribution to developments during Australia's first fifty, formative years as a national entity.[1]

Ainsworth's working life began on 1 May 1893 when, only one month short of his 15th birthday, he became a trainee teacher with the Department of Public Instruction in NSW. In those days, teacher training in NSW was an on-the-job process, which the teenage George Ainsworth completed over the standard four-year period under the supervision of his father, John, then school master of the Lucknow Public School, near Orange. Upon qualification as a teacher in his own right in 1897, Ainsworth was posted to teach at the Upper Yanko Province Provisional School in the south-west of NSW for a year, then to the Spring Terrace Public School in Bathurst for two years, before being sent to teach in Sydney respectively at the Crown Street and Rozelle Superior Public Schools. This progression in his teaching career took him from small elementary schools in rural areas, where the student body numbered variously from 10-25 pupils, to larger metropolitan schools offering both primary and post-primary education, with the latter including mathematics and foreign languages in most instances.[2] Ainsworth was said

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[1] Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Searle (eds.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.7: *1891-1939, A-Ch* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), p.22.

[2] Prime Minister's Department Personnel File, 'G.F. Ainsworth', National Archives of Australia [hereafter NAA], CP268/1; Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.155ff; New South Wales Department of School Education, *Government Schools of New South Wales 1848 to 1993*, 4th.edn. (Sydney: Department of School Education Library, Management Information Services Directorate, 1993), pp.17-18, 239.

later to have had some expertise in German and French, which perhaps derived from his teaching experience at this time.

1. Federation (1901)

After a long career in education with the NSW Department of Public Instruction, during which the development of basically competent literacy and numeracy skills in pupils was a teacher's prime, daily task, Federation – the creation of Australia as a nation in its own right – opened the way for a career change and advancement via opportunities in the newly-formed federal public service. Having an interest in - one might even say a passion for - science that could never truly be fulfilled in the NSW public education sector, Ainsworth seized the moment and accepted an offer of appointment to the Department of Home Affairs in January 1910 as a Clerk, 4th Class, in the Meteorological Branch located in the national capital in Melbourne. A little over a year later, in February 1911, he was transferred to a position of Assistant, Class E, in the Professional Division, which gave him professional status as a meteorologist in the Central Weather Bureau in Melbourne. It was from this position that he was selected by Dr Douglas Mawson of the University of Adelaide to serve as a meteorologist and head of the Macquarie Island party of the forthcoming Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE). So Ainsworth's career prospects clearly had benefited in a very short period of time from his decision to remove himself from the NSW state education sector, where he had probably gone as far as he could, to the wider, more opportune and challenging environment of Australia's federal public sector.

Mawson's goals for the AAE related quite specifically to scientific research and exploration of territory in this region, rather than the pursuit of such milestones as reaching the South Pole, which had inspired the earlier British expeditions of Shackleton, and Scott. And, as the term "Australasian" indicates, it was to be very largely an Australian-New Zealand enterprise, expressing the exuberant nationalism of these two new neighbour nations. Accordingly, Mawson recruited mainly Australian and New Zealand personnel for this expedition, with participation of Britons and other nationalities being limited to those whose particular expertise was indispensable to its success. Thus John King Davis, for example, was recruited from Britain to captain the steam yacht, *Aurora*, in transporting and supplying the AAE, given his past experience in this regard with Shackleton's earlier expedition in 1907-1909. Similarly, Frank Wild was appointed to take charge of the western base party, as he 'had already distinguished himself in the South on both the Scott and the Shackleton expeditions.'[3] And a Swiss national, Dr Xavier Mertz, was included in Mawson's own main base party on the bases of being an expert ski-runner and mountaineer.

The achievements of the AAE were considerable and indisputable. Mawson had been intent upon gathering and recording information that would be preserved and published to enlighten humankind regarding this relatively unknown part of the world and, also, pave the way for further such enterprises. In both respects, he realized these ambitions. His two-volume book, *The Home of the Blizzard*, with its detailed and wide-

[3] Sir Douglas Mawson, *The Home of the Blizzard*, 3rd.edn. (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1996), p.7.

ranging account of the expedition's findings, began the process of enlightenment that he had envisaged with its publication by William Heinemann in London in 1915. This work has since been republished in two later editions (in 1930 and 1996) and is still currently in print. And it was complemented brilliantly by the inclusion of vivid photographs of Antarctic scenes and AAE activities taken by Frank Hurley, as well as a film released in 1915 and shown thereafter to public audiences in Australia, Britain and the United States.[4] As for opening the way for further such expeditions to the Antarctic, Mawson himself subsequently led another – the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE) – from 1929-1931, which resulted in these three nations each claiming considerable territory in Antarctica where, subsequently, they established permanent bases for on-going research in this region.

Though often under-rated in accounts of the AAE, the activities of the Macquarie Island party were certainly as important to the outcomes of the expedition as those of the other two base parties, led by Mawson and Wild, in Antarctica itself. This party was responsible, in the first place, for maintaining the wireless link between Australia and the two Antarctic bases, which became even more vital when Mawson got into difficulty and had to extend his party's stay at the main base for nearly nine months in 1913. In addition, Ainsworth and his four colleagues had their own research to do, mapping Macquarie Island and its geographical and geological structure, recording tide and weather patterns, and identifying and cataloguing the great variety of plant, animal and bird life – some of which were newly discovered species - that they found there. As a consequence of their activities, the Australian Government decided to maintain the Macquarie Island station as a permanent base thereafter and, subsequently, to declare the island part of the national trust, thus banning sealing, whaling and other such activities in its vicinity.

Ainsworth returned to Australia with Mawson and other members of the AAE in February 1914 with his status and reputation considerably enhanced. He consolidated this situation by providing Mawson with a substantial written account of the Macquarie Island party's activities and achievements for inclusion in *The Home of the Blizzard*. And this account, as one competent observer has noted in recent times, still 'remains an important source about the island.'[5] After being awarded a special Polar Medal and otherwise applauded, along with his AAE colleagues, for their pioneering achievements as Antarctic explorers, Ainsworth returned to duty once again at the Central Weather Bureau in Melbourne. Shortly thereafter, however, the Great War intervened to offer him career prospects in an entirely new direction.

2. The Great War (1914-1919)

Ainsworth's Commonwealth Public Service file records that shortly after being commissioned in the 62nd Infantry Battalion, Australian Military Forces, on 16 October 1915, he was granted leave without pay for military purposes from the Department of Home Affairs. Lieutenant Ainsworth then served as an Intelligence Officer with the 3rd

[4] Philip Ayres, *Mawson: A Life* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), pp.104-110.
[5] Nairn and Searle, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, p.22.

Military District (Victoria), Department of Defence, until May 1916, when he was transferred to Brisbane to perform a similar role as a captain with the 1st Military District (Queensland). Subsequently, he commenced duty as head of the newly-formed Special Intelligence Bureau there on 16 August 1917. Ainsworth would occupy this position until 1 November 1919 when, with the merging of the Bureau and Commonwealth Police into an Investigation Branch under the control of the Attorney-General's Department, he was promoted as Inspector-in-Charge of the Investigation Branch in Queensland.[6] In these various roles, Ainsworth was part of a network of officials responsible for matters of internal security in Australia. He was required to be vigilant, therefore, and to respond to any apparent threat posed by individuals or groups who were perceived to be disaffected, disloyal or subversive. In the early years of the Great War, such individuals and groups were readily identifiable, for the most part, as voices opposing Australia's participation in the war were relatively few and all enemy aliens resident in the country had been required to register with the police. But, as the war dragged on into 1916 and beyond without an end in sight, that situation began to change.

Indeed, ultimately, the Great War changed the political landscape in Australia to a significant extent. At the parliamentary level, it split the ruling Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 1916 over the issue of conscription, which resulted in the then Prime Minister and Labor leader, William Morris Hughes, leaving the party with a number of his colleagues to form the National Labor Party (NLP). In 1917, the NLP merged with the Liberals, creating the Nationalist Party – a coalition of former Labor and conservative politicians – which held power in the federal arena thereafter until 1929. So while a majority of Australians continued to support the nation at war by re-electing Hughes' government, a growing majority demonstrated quite clearly in the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917 that they did not support conscription in Australia as a means of prosecuting the war.

At the community level, the conscription referenda results showed that there were real concerns about this war and Australia's part in it. There were many active, vociferous anti-war groups in Australia – pacifists, international socialists, Irish nationalists, Russia radicals, and more – who responded as they did for personal, ideological, national and other reasons. The war, and the upheavals it produced, heightened tensions in the community that would remain and provide a legacy of bitterness and division for decades to come.[7] Though an Australian patriot and ardent admirer of Hughes, Ainsworth had his own views and spoke his own mind on these issues, irrespective of the positions that he held in the federal security services. For instance, where other security officials laid blame for the "Red Flag Riots" of March 1919 in Brisbane on the local Russian community and its leaders, Ainsworth stated patently in his reports on the subject that responsibility for these disturbances rested entirely with an 'unruly section' of Australian returned servicemen, some of whom were

[6] Prime Minister's Department Personnel File, 'G.F. Ainsworth', NAA, CP268/1.
[7] For a detailed discussion of the situation in Queensland at this time see Raymond Evans, *Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Homefront, 1914-1918* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

said to be 'armed'.[8] And while he advised against the federal government getting involved in any response to these events – it was a state government matter, in his opinion – he did his duty when federal authorities sought information from him, on which to base prosecution action against leaders of the local Russian community known to have participated in the Red Flag disturbances. Regardless of Ainsworth's personal views on such matters, his service in a succession of federal government security agencies from 1916 onwards placed him in a privileged position of having virtually unrestricted access to information, from all levels of government and the community in Australia, concerning the state of mind and state of affairs of a relatively young nation striving to come to terms with its involvement in the Great War. It was a position of trust, of which he would always be mindful, and one that only a handful of other Australians could claim to have enjoyed.

3. The Post-War Era

Ainsworth and Hughes met several times later in 1919, after the Prime Minister had returned from participating in peace and imperial conference negotiations in Europe. An affinity seemed to develop between them at this time such that, a year or so later, when the Prime Minister thought himself in need of the services of someone trustworthy and reliable to advise him on foreign affairs, Ainsworth would be the person 'selected by the Prime Minister as being particularly fitted for the position.'[9] Hughes' need in this regard arose in consequence of Australia's obligations as a foundation member of the new League of Nations. Senator Millen, who had represented Australia in Geneva at the first meeting of the Assembly of the League, recommended to Hughes that a Foreign Section should be created within the Prime Minister's Department, 'with a competent officer…deputed to deal with the League of Nations matters….'[10] The instructions that Ainsworth received in April 1921, upon his appointment as Officer-in-Charge of the Foreign Section, were as follows:

> The Officer in Charge of this Section, (Mr. Ainsworth) will deal with all questions arising from the League of Nations, except those concerning the Pacific, and will keep himself fully informed of our obligations, financial and other, arising therefrom. He will, further, be responsible for matters arising out of the Labor Charter, seeing that all the information asked for is supplied. He will, further, keep in touch with all documents dealing with International arrangements, conventions, etc., and see that the Secretary to the Department is supplied regularly with a précis on subjects which are active. He will particularly watch so far as possible the trend of public opinion in foreign countries, except of course, those countries dealt with by the Pacific Branch, and keep the Secretary fully informed.[11]

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[8] Telegram Q.82 of 25 March 1919 from Subsided, Brisbane (Ainsworth), to Subsided, Melbourne (H.E. Jones), NAA, A456, W26/241. Also see Ainsworth's report of 26 March 1919 to SIB headquarters, *Ibid*.
[9] Memo dated 25 June 1921 from Acting Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, to Acting Secretary, Public Service Commissioner, in P.M.'s Department Personnel File, 'G.F. Ainsworth', NAA, CP268/1.
[10] Minute dated 23/6/1921 from Senator E.W. Millen in *ibid*.
[11] P.M's Department Instruction re 'Foreign Section (General)', dated 26/4/21, in *ibid*.

Despite repeated opposition from the Public Service Board over the irregularity of the appointment, Ainsworth remained in this position serving Hughes, and his successor as Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce, for over three years. In this capacity, he accompanied Bruce to London in September 1923 as a member of the Australian delegation attending imperial and economic conferences there. And later, in October 1923, he was the sole Australian representative at the General Conference of Representatives of the Members of the International Labor Organization, which met at Geneva in Switzerland. So George Ainsworth was uniquely placed to observe and influence Australia's role in foreign affairs in the early years of the post-war era.

4. The Great Depression

Ainsworth's departure from the Commonwealth Public Service with effect from 31 December 1924 was precipitated ultimately by the political demise of his patron, William Morris Hughes, in February 1923, and an apparent inability on his own part to work over the longer term with Prime Minister Bruce. Once in the private sector, Ainsworth became manager of the Melbourne motor-parts firm, Kellow-Falkiner Pty Ltd, from 1925-1929, general manager in New Zealand for the Chrysler Corporation from 1930-1932 and then, upon his return to Brisbane in 1932, general manager of the Barnet Glass Rubber Company. While he seemed able to cope with the challenges facing large businesses in these exceptionally hard times – especially once the impact of the Great Depression began to be felt in the 1930s – they were not as stimulating for him as those he had experienced in the past. Certainly, the Chrysler appointment originally had offered the prospect of a transfer with the company to the United States, following a period of initiation in New Zealand. But this prospect soon disappeared after a reassessment of the company's plans with the onset of the depression. Ainsworth himself summed up his experience of life in the private sector when, in a letter to his former SIB chief, Harold Jones, he admitted that while the income he received was more than generous, other factors convinced him the decision to move from the public sector in 1924 had been 'a cardinal mistake'.[12]

Another effect of the depression that had an impact on Ainsworth's future was the instability and eventual split it caused, at least indirectly, in the ranks of the ALP over the policies of Federal Treasurer, Ted Theodore. This resulted in Joe Lyons and a number of other Labor politicians joining Hughes in forming the United Australia Party (UAP) in 1931.[13] Ainsworth joined the UAP as its state organizer in Queensland in 1935 and also stood as a party candidate in local government elections in Brisbane. But, while the UAP under Joe Lyons' leadership enjoyed success federally and in some of the southern states, this was not to be the case in Queensland where, with both the ALP and the County Party having strong electoral support, the new party was able to make little impact.

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[12] Letter dated 29 December 1936 from G.F. Ainsworth to Col. Harold Jones, Commissioner of Police, Canberra, NAA, A391, Box 1, 'Ainsworth, George Frederick'.

[13] Anne Henderson, 'Joseph Aloysius Lyons' in Michelle Grattan (ed.), *Australian Prime Ministers* (Sydney: New Holland, 20000, p.155; Gerard Henderson, *Menzies' Child: The Liberal Party of Australia*, rev.edn. (Sydney: Harper Collins, 1998), p.54.

With his political ambitions foiled and gambling debts mounting, as he sought a challenge in betting on horse-racing that seemed to be missing elsewhere in his life, Ainsworth resigned as UAP organizer in 1937 and moved to Sydney to make a fresh start in small business, running a delicatessen in Parramatta Road, Annandale, until his death in October 1950 at 72 years of age. This period of his life certainly saw an abrupt change in Ainsworth's circumstances for, in the absence of the generous salary associated with his previous employment, he now had to support himself fully from his own enterprise. And yet, this transition was not actually as problematic as it might seem. Ainsworth had always preferred to invest in himself, rather than in material possessions such as property, shares and the like. He never owned a home – the houses he occupied were either rented, or on loan from family members – and the motor vehicles he had used in the past were invariably government or company cars that came with the job he was doing at the time. When the time came to make the transition to this small business venture, therefore, he showed that he could rely on himself - on his own initiative and resourcefulness - to make it a success. This tells us something about Ainsworth himself and his manner and ability in coping with change. But, as with the earlier elements of this examination of his varied career path, it also offers us a glimpse - from his own quite unique perspective - on life, society and change in the Australia of his time.

5. Conclusion

As this study has shown, historical events including Federation, the Great War, the Post-War Era, and the Great Depression each brought significant changes in George Frederick Ainsworth's career, that afforded him a varied, unique, and even privileged perspective on developments in Australia in his lifetime. Examining his life and career, with a particular focus on the period from 1901 to 1950, enables us to share this perspective, at least to the extent to which evidence remains available for us to do so. In addition, it enhances our understanding of change as it affected, and was effected in Australia during the first half-century of its existence as a nation. And all of that derives from just this one Australian biographical case study.